

Stephen A. Douglas

Memorial

Preliminary Summary of Information
July 7, 1975

Commission on Chicago Historical
and Architectural Landmarks

STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS MEMORIAL
35th and Cottage Grove Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Date Completed: 1881

Architect: Leonard W. Volk

The Stephen A. Douglas Tomb is a state memorial that occupies a 2.2-acre site at 35th Street and Cottage Grove Avenue; this land was formerly a part of Douglas's estate Oakenwald. It is a memorial to Stephen A. Douglas, a United States Senator and statesman, who played an important role in the development of the State of Illinois and, nationally, in the events that preceded the Civil War.

Douglas was born on April 23, 1813, in Brandon, Vermont. His father died shortly after Douglas's birth and his mother was unable financially to raise the large family, so Douglas was raised by his maternal aunt.

At 15, he was forced to leave school and become an apprentice cabinetmaker. He was later able to return to school and study law. In 1833, his legal studies incomplete, Douglas moved west to Winchester, Illinois. He worked for a time as an auctioneer's clerk and schoolmaster, and was able to complete his legal studies in 1834. After practicing law for a year, he was named Attorney General by the Illinois state legislature. He was elected to that body himself in 1836 and became an Illinois Supreme Court justice in 1841.

Douglas was elected to the U. S. House of Representatives in 1843 and the Senate in 1847. In the Senate, he became a proponent of "popular sovereignty"—the idea that the sovereign people of a territory under the general principles of the Constitution should determine the status of slavery themselves. Popular sovereignty had a widespread appeal in Illinois and was in accord with the frontier tradition of letting the people rule. Once in the Senate, Douglas became known nationally for his oratorical and debating skills. It was there that he earned the nickname "Little Giant."

Douglas was married to Martha P. Martin in April, 1847, and they had two sons. His wife died in 1853 and in 1856 he married Adele Cutts. Douglas invested heavily in property in the Chicago area. Among his purchases was a 53-acre tract on the South Side near the Illinois Central right-of-way. This land was planned as an estate for the Douglas family and was named Oakenwald. Douglas died before the estate could be fully developed.

Douglas became a national figure in 1850 when he was instrumental in drafting the U.S. government's Compromise of 1850. This compromise provided for the admission of California to the Union as a free state

(slavery prohibited) as a concession to the North and a new and extremely stringent fugitive slave law as a concession to the South. The compromise proved to be extremely unpopular in both the North and the South. Douglas's constituents in Illinois were particularly unhappy with the new fugitive slave law. In Chicago, the city council passed an ordinance that ordered police to ignore the law and not arrest and return runaway slaves to their former owners.

After the compromise was passed, Douglas returned to Chicago and defended himself and the bill. In 1854, Douglas again raised the ire of some of his constituents when he became the force behind the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In this proposal, the territory of Nebraska would be divided into Nebraska and Kansas and the issue of slavery in each territory would be determined by popular sovereignty. It was assumed the Nebraska would vote "free" and Kansas vote "slave." The Kansas-Nebraska Act had one formidable political obstacle. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 had forbidden slavery in all the Nebraska territory which lay north of the line of demarcation it had established at the 36° 30' parallel. The Missouri Compromise had come to be regarded by many Northerners as the ultimate solution to the slave/free state question—the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act necessitated its repeal. Hence, the bill elicited so much controversy in Congress that bloodshed was barely averted. Some of the members even carried concealed revolvers or knives, or both. The Kansas-Nebraska Act after passage was vastly unpopular. It served to destroy the Compromise of 1850 and, more importantly, the Missouri Compromise. With this, the delicate understanding between North and South was also destroyed and hostility became even more open.

Douglas again returned to Chicago to defend himself and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. He was able to speak, however, as fighting between his opponents and proponents had broken out in the city. The Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and slavery became central issues when Douglas was running for re-election to the Senate in 1858. His opponent, a then relatively unknown Abraham Lincoln, challenged him to a series of debates.

The debates received national attention and initially were viewed as somewhat of a mismatch. Douglas had a reputation for his suave manner and his skill as a debater, while his challenger, Lincoln, provided a striking contrast with his ill-fitting clothes, high-pitched voice, and apparent discomfort with public speaking. Lincoln's appearance, however, belied his ability as a debater. Slavery was a key issue in the debates with Lincoln arguing for federal legislation against slavery in any of the territories and Douglas arguing for popular sovereignty stating that the federal government could outlaw slavery in the territories but it would be abolished, in reality, only by a vote of the people in territorial legislatures. Douglas won the election and returned to the Senate. He was again to face Lincoln in an election in 1860 when he ran unsuccessfully for the presidency. After that election,

he resumed his Senate seat. Douglas died in Chicago on June 3, 1861, following a long illness.

After his death, a group of Chicagoans organized and founded an association to erect and maintain a monument in Chicago in memory of Stephen A. Douglas. Leonard W. Volk, a well-known sculptor and a relative of Douglas's by marriage, was commissioned to design the tomb and monument. The fund-raising efforts were not successful, and in 1865 the state purchased land from Mrs. Douglas and assumed the cost of building the tomb. Douglas was interred in the marble sarcophagus of the tomb on June 3, 1868; the tomb was completed in 1881.

Douglas's tomb is situated in the center of a neatly landscaped 2.2-acre park which is surrounded by a well-maintained concrete and wrought iron fence. A black wrought iron gate in the fence marks the main entrance at 35th Street. Here, a state marker explains who Douglas was and the significance of his tomb to the State of Illinois. At the far southwest corner of the park is a red brick caretaker's cottage.

The tomb and monument are centered on a small octagon of land that is elevated approximately one foot, bordered by a granite retaining wall, and separated from the rest of the park by a series of walks. Three steps lead up to the main section of the base of the 96-foot white granite structure. Seated on a pillar at each corner of the main section is one of four bronze allegorical figures representing Illinois, History, Justice, and Eloquence. Above the main section is a second section of the base containing four bronze bas-relief panels which depict the advance of civilization in America. The patina has been cleaned from these panels and they are now a dull dark brown color. Above this section is a square support for a 46-foot granite column which, in turn, supports a statue of Douglas. In relief on the column are three ornamental bands; the lower two are a series of stars and the upper one of oak leaves. The bronze figure of Douglas atop this column is nine feet nine inches high. Douglas is depicted standing in repose with a scroll in his left hand, placed against his hip. His right hand is thrust under the lapel of his tightly buttoned coat as he faces eastward over the Illinois Central Tracks towards Lake Michigan.

The tomb itself is cut into the main section of the granite base of the monument. Eight steps lead up from the ground to the black wrought iron grated outer door of the opening to the tomb chamber on the east side of the base. The lintel above the door is of Joliet "Athens Marble," the original material of the base and sepulchre. All of the exposed material was changed to the present granite in 1877. An ornamental wreath and the letter "D" are in relief in the center of the lintel. Through the door, a Vermont marble sarcophagus can be seen. The sarcophagus contains the iron casket in which

Douglas's body rests and it also supports a bust portrait of Douglas by Volk. Cut into the sarcophagus is the inscription:

Stephen A. Douglas

Born

April 23, 1813

Died

June 3, 1861

"Tell my children to obey the laws
and uphold the Constitution."



